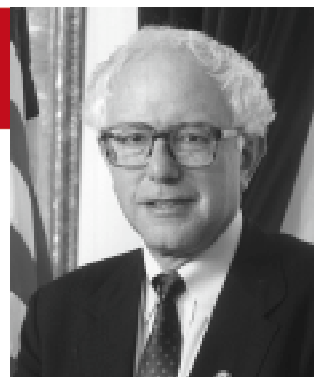




U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

A Special Focus on Veterans' Issues



Summer 2000

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Fellow Vermonter,

Knowing your interest in veterans' issues, I wanted to take this opportunity to update you on some important new developments. While veterans are still not getting the support they deserve, I am happy to report that there has been some progress made to ensure that the federal government keeps its promises to the men and women who put their lives on the line serving this country.

An important area where we have seen some success in the last couple of years is veterans' health care. Building on the \$1.7 billion increase in veterans' health care that passed the Congress last year, the U.S. House has approved an additional \$1.3 billion increase this year. These increases are a direct result of the hard work of many veterans and their friends both inside and outside the Congress.

I am also happy to report that the U.S. House has voted to increase veterans' education benefits. These increases, if ultimately approved by the U.S. Senate, would help restore some of the purchasing power that veterans have lost because of increased college education costs.

Despite these and other improvements, I remain very concerned that veterans' programs are still significantly underfunded. While we are currently making some progress, all of us must redouble our efforts to make sure that veterans' programs continue to receive the attention and the funding they deserve.

In addition, an ongoing and serious problem is that there are still large numbers of veterans who are not aware of the benefits available to them. No matter how good veterans' program are, they will not help a veteran or his or her family if the veteran does not participate in them. I have recently met with top officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs to push them to be more aggressive in their outreach efforts.

Finally, I am very pleased to announce that Sam Haskins has joined my office as our Veterans Specialist. Sam, who has served the veterans of Vermont for many years with the Veterans of Foreign Wars at the VA facility in White River Jct., brings a wealth of knowledge and experience that will be invaluable in helping the veterans of the state of Vermont. If you have any questions or concerns about a veteran's issue, please do not hesitate to contact Sam in my office.

Inside this newsletter, you will find more information about these efforts and other important veterans' issues. As always, please do not hesitate to contact my Burlington office at **1 Church Street, 2nd Floor, Burlington, VT 05401, (800) 339-9834**, or my Washington office at **2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515, (202) 225-4115**, or by email at **bernie@mail.house.gov**. Also, please visit my web page at **http://bernie.house.gov**. You'll find a wealth of information there.

Sincerely yours,

Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

Veterans' Health Care Gets Another Much Deserved Boost

Last year, the VA spending bill in Congress increased funding for veterans' health care by some \$1.7 billion. This increased funding was the result of pressure put on the leadership of the Congress and the administration by the veterans' community and those of us in the Congress who are tired of seeing veterans' health care programs continuously underfunded.

This year, the VA spending bill that passed the U.S. House increased veterans' health care spending by another \$1.3 billion. While I support an even greater appropriation, this increase will go a long way to undo the harm that was done by so many years of inadequate funding. In addition to this overall fund-

ing increase, I supported an amendment to increase the VA medical research program by \$30 million. These increases must still be passed by the U.S. Senate and approved by the President.

During consideration of the VA spending bill in the U.S. House, a coalition of members of Congress from the Northeast, including myself, tried to repeal the so-called "Veterans Equitable Resource Allocation" (VERA) system. VERA was supposed to distribute VA health care dollars to the various regions of the country more fairly. Instead, VERA has resulted in a transfer of dollars from the Northeast to the South and Southwest. There is no doubt that veterans' health care in the South and Southwest needs

additional resources. But increases there should not come at the expense of veterans in Vermont and the rest of the Northeast. Unfortunately, members of Congress from the rest of the country banded together to preserve the current VERA system.

Fairness for Military Retirees

Currently, there are over 400,000 disabled career military veterans who must sacrifice their retired pay each month in order to receive their VA disability compensation. I have consistently worked to undo this unfair policy. Men and women who



qualify for both military retirement pay and VA disability compensation should not have one offset against the other.

To accomplish this goal, I am cosponsoring H.R. 303 which would eliminate the offset between VA disability compensation and military retiree pay. In addition, the Senate has added language to its version of this year's Defense Authorization bill that would do away with the offset. I will be working with other Members of the U.S. House to see that the Senate language is included in the final bill.

Vietnam Veterans Should Register with the Agent Orange Registry

The Department of Defense has been extremely slow in acknowledging the very real illnesses that Vietnam veterans are suffering due to exposure to Agent Orange. Agent Orange is the herbicide sprayed by the U.S. military to kill vegetation during the Vietnam War. This extremely toxic herbicide contains dioxin, a chemical compound that is known to cause a variety of adverse health problems. During the Vietnam War, over 20 million gallons of herbicides were sprayed over 6 million acres in the Southeast Asian theater of operations.

As a result of pressure from veterans' organizations, the federal government has been forced to acknowledge that the following conditions are service connected for veterans who served in Vietnam:

- Chloracne (*a skin disorder*)
- Porphyria Cutanea Tarda
- Acute/subacute peripheral neuropathy
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- Soft Tissue Sarcoma
- Hodgkin's disease
- Multiple Myeloma
- Prostate Cancer
- Respiratory Cancers (*including cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea and bronchus*)

In addition, children of Vietnam veterans with Spina Bifida are eligible for certain benefits.

Recent studies have indicated that adult onset diabetes is also linked to Agent Orange exposure. The VA is currently deter-



mining whether to add that condition to the list of those illnesses presumed to be service connected. I have written to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs urging that adult onset diabetes be added to the list as soon as possible.

All Vietnam veterans should contact the White River Junction VA hospital to arrange for an examination and to have their names added to the Agent Orange registry. This is particularly important for veterans who served in Vietnam during January 1965 to September 1970 — the period during which Agent Orange was sprayed over Vietnam. By having this examination, veterans will learn whether they currently have any Agent Orange-related illnesses. In addition, by having their names added to this regis-

try, veterans will receive periodic communications about current developments. This is important because in the future other illnesses may be linked to Agent Orange and, therefore, veterans not currently eligible for benefits may become eligible. In addition, by joining the registry, you may help the VA to identify other conditions that are caused by Agent Orange.

Veterans are Entitled to Low Cost Prescription Drugs

As I talk to veterans around the state, I have been surprised that many of them are not aware that they are entitled to a major prescription drug benefit through the VA health care system. Under this benefit, each 30-day supply of a medication costs \$2.00 and may be free if the veteran has a lower income or if the medication is for a service-connected condition.

To be eligible for this prescription drug benefit, you must be under the regular care of a VA provider and the medication must be prescribed by the VA provider. It is important to have the medical records from

your non-VA doctors prescribing your medicines at the VA clinic at the time of your appointment to avoid delays in receiving your medications. Although the VA pharmacy does not carry every medication, in most cases another similar medication will be available for those medicines the VA doesn't stock.

You can choose to see a physician at the VA facility in White River Junction, Burlington or Bennington.



Appointments are available during the weekday, as well as evenings and weekends. (You may, in fact, find that you can get a quicker appointment if you can visit a facility during the evening or on a weekend). Veterans should understand that by seeing a physician at the VA they do not have to end their relationships with their current physicians.

I strongly encourage all veterans who might be eligible for this benefit to call my Burlington office for more information at (800) 339-9834 or (802) 862-0697.

U.S. House Approves Improvements in Veterans' Education Benefits

On May 23, 2000, the U.S. House approved the Veterans and Dependents Millennium Education Act. I strongly supported this legislation. This bill increases the basic Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB) benefit from \$536 to \$600 per month during periods of full-time study effective October 1, 2000. The basic MGIB benefit will increase again from \$600 to \$720 per month, effective October 1, 2002.

In addition, the bill allows persons still on active duty to convert from the old VEAP educational program to MGIB by paying \$2,700; increases educational

benefits for the spouses and children of certain deceased veterans; and modernizes the MGIB by authorizing the use of MGIB benefits to pay for occupational licensing and certification tests and by allowing MGIB payments to be received over breaks that fall between semesters during the academic year.

Although this bill does not go far enough in keeping pace with rapidly increasing educational expenses, it is an important step forward that will help make a college education more affordable for veterans.

Are You Taking Advantage of the Veterans Benefits You Have Earned?

In addition to low cost prescription drugs, veterans are eligible for a number of programs including health care, educational assistance, home buying loan guarantees that allow many veterans to buy a home with no money down, disability compensation for service connected disabilities, and many others. Unfortunately, many veterans do not take advantage of the benefits they have earned through their service, often because they do not know what benefits are available. Importantly, in some cases there are also benefits available to spouses and former spouses of veterans.

If you are a veteran or the spouse or former spouse of a veteran, I encourage you to contact Sam Haskins in my Burlington office. He would be happy to

review your situation and assist you in determining what federal benefits may be available to you.



To the Editor...

Burlington Free Press

Attention veterans: Do you know that you can get most prescription drugs from any VA hospital for about \$2 per prescription per month? I didn't either until I read a newsletter put out by U.S. Rep. Bernie Sanders.

I called the number Bernie listed (1-800-339-9834), and in a few days, I received an enrollment form. I attached a copy of my army discharge and sent it to the VA Hospital in White River. In a few more days, I received my eligibility notice and was told to call the hospital for an admissions appointment. I was given a brief physical exam by a staff physician, who questioned me and entered the items from my records, as well as prescriptions for my drugs into a computer.

In about four or five days, there in my mailbox were all the drugs he had ordered. Two appointment notices were enclosed with refill instructions.

A couple of weeks later, an invoice arrived for the prescriptions at \$2 for each 30-day supply, plus \$50.80 for the visit. The visit charge was later paid by my insurance company. Compared with the \$90 to \$100 per month I had been paying for prescriptions, this was a real bargain.

I recently met with my assigned VA primary care provider who will monitor my health needs in the future. This doesn't mean I have to quit using my present doctors... I couldn't be happier with my DVA experience... I do want to alert other veterans who, as I was, might be unaware of this benefit.

Carle Williams, Strafford

In This Issue...

A Special Focus on Veterans' Issues...

A Letter from Bernie 1

Veterans' Health Care Gets Another Much Deserved Boost..... 2

Fairness for Military Retirees 2

Vietnam Veterans Should Register with the Agent Orange Registry 2

Veterans Are Entitled To Low Cost Prescription Drugs 3

U.S. House Approves Improvements in Veterans' Education Benefits 3

Are You Taking Advantage of the Veterans Benefits You Have Earned? 3

VA to Open Out-patient Clinic in Rutland 4

Sam Haskins Joins Sanders' Office as Veterans Specialist 4

Contact Information 4

Rep. Bernie Sanders
1 Church Street, Second Floor
Burlington, VT 05401-4417

Telephone: 802-862-0697
Toll-free: 800-339-9834
bernie@mail.house.gov • <http://bernie.house.gov>

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Official Business



M.C.
Bulk Rate

If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.

This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.

VA to Open Out-patient Clinic in Rutland

The White River Junction VA hospital has signed a contract for a new Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Rutland that will provide primary care for veterans. The new clinic is slated to open on September 11th of this year and will be located at 215 Stratton Road. The opening of the Rutland clinic promises to make the VA system far more accessible for area veterans.

Contact Information for Veterans

State Veterans Affairs Office	Montpelier	828-3379
Vermont Veterans Home	Bennington	442-6353
	Toll-free	800-505-4000
Veterans Administration Regional Office (<i>Benefits and Assistance</i>)		
	White River Junction	296-5177
	Toll-free	800-827-1000
Medical Center	White River Junction	295-9363
VA Outreach Clinic	White River Junction	296-6399
Appletree Bay VA Clinic	Burlington	864-4492
Bennington VA Clinic	Bennington	447-6913
Vet Centers	South Burlington.....	862-1806
	White River Junction	295-2908

Department of Veterans Affairs		
Acquisition Policy and Review Service (<i>businesses</i>)		202-273-6047
Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization.....		202-565-8124
Assistant Secretary for Information Resources Management		
(<i>Freedom of Information Act Requests</i>)		202-273-8135
To report waste or abuse in the DVA:		
Inspector General's Hotline.		800-488-8244

Information on cemeteries and burial, write to:
The National Cemetery System
810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20420

Sam Haskins Joins Sanders' Office as Veterans Specialist

Sam Haskins, a Vietnam War veteran, has joined Sanders' Vermont staff as his Veterans' Specialist. Sam has worked with veterans for the past 27 years, and was State Commander of the VFW during 1983-84. For the past 14 years Sam has been employed by the VFW as an advocate for veterans' benefits at the VA in White River Junction.

Sam will be located at the Paramount Building, 167 Main Street, Room 410 in Brattleboro, Vermont. The office number in Brattleboro is (802) 254-8732. The toll free number for Bernie Sanders' congressional office is 1-800-339-9834, which can forward your call

to Sam. Any Vermont veteran who is experiencing a problem with the VA, the Department of Defense or any other governmental agency is urged to call the office.

Because Sam Haskins is one of the

most respected and knowledgeable veterans' advocates in the state of Vermont with years of experience, he will play a great role in enabling the office to better serve veterans.